

DOES 1 CORINTHIANS 10:13 IMPLY LIBERTARIAN FREEDOM? A REPLY TO PAUL A. HIMES

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The perennial debate between libertarians and compatibilists over the best understanding of human freedom and responsibility has primarily been a philosophical and theological one. Biblical exegesis has seldom been a source for attempts to settle this dispute. However, in a recent article in this journal, Paul Himes argues that 1 Cor 10:13 provides strong, if not decisive, evidence in favor of libertarianism, at least in situations in which Christians are tempted to sin.¹

Libertarianism, of course, is the view that human freedom requires the ability to do otherwise, or as Himes puts it, the power of contrary choice. Compatibilism, on the other hand, holds that freedom requires simply the ability to act without restraint in accordance with one's desires and values. Thus, compatibilism, but not libertarianism, allows that freedom is compatible with determinism. Himes's argument is that 1 Cor 10:13, properly interpreted, implies that when Christians are confronted with the temptation to sin they possess the power of contrary choice and therefore libertarian freedom.² In this paper, I will argue contrary to Himes that 1 Cor 10:13 does not imply libertarianism. Indeed, my contention is that this text, understood in context and in light of other relevant texts, actually supports a compatibilist view of freedom.

I. HIMES'S ARGUMENT

A significant portion of the exegesis of 1 Cor 10:13 concerns the proper interpretation of *πειρασμός* which is variously translated as “trial” or “temptation.”³ If the word is understood to mean “trial” (in the sense of external pressures such as persecution and other problems of life), then it is unlikely that this text can provide any strong support to libertarianism. Himes admits as much and spends considerable space arguing from the context that *πειρασμός* should be translated “temptation,” referring to potential seductions to sin that appeal to a person's internal desires or cravings. A non-libertarian exegete is free, of course, to challenge his view

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¹ Paul A. Himes, “When a Christian Sins: 1 Corinthians 10:13 and the Power of Contrary Choice in Relation to the Compatibilist-Libertarian Debate,” *JETS* 54 (2011) 329–44.

² It should be noted that Himes is not the first to appeal to 1 Cor 10:13 to argue for a libertarian view of freedom. William Lane Craig, for example, points to this verse as evidence for libertarianism in the course of arguing for his Molinist view of providence (see his “Ducking Friendly Fire: Davison on the Grounding Objection,” *Philosophia Christi*, Series 2, 8:1 [2006] 161–66).

³ See BDAG 793; and *The NIV Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words* (ed. Verlyn D. Verbrugge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), s.v. *πειρασμός* 998–1002.

of 1 Cor 10:13 by questioning his translation of this term and contending for “trial” instead. To my mind, however, Himes has made a convincing case for this understanding of *πειρασμός*. In any case, I will not challenge his translation here. What concerns me more is the question of what 1 Cor 10:13, on Himes’s understanding of *πειρασμός*, implies with regard to the compatibilist-libertarian debate. Given that Paul is discussing the Christian’s avoidance of temptation to sin, does this necessarily imply that the Christian has libertarian freedom when confronted with temptation?

Himes contends that it does. He writes,

The verse indicates that the Christian is not forced to succumb to temptation and possesses the capability to resist. In other words, the temptation has its limits and does not possess the power to *force* the Christian to succumb to it (or, more accurately, it does not possess the power to render the Christian unable to endure). In other words, the temptation is such that *not* succumbing to it is possible.⁴

From this summation of his understanding of the text, Himes then presents the following argument:

(1) Paul is addressing believers (as evidenced by “our fathers” in verse 1, by use of the first plural throughout the passage, etc.). (2) Believers are tempted to sin. (3) Believers commit sin. (4) There are limits placed on the power of each temptation to sin. (5) The limits are such that the believer can endure without sinning. In light of statements (3) and (5), one can only conclude that it is possible not to have sinned in circumstances where one did, in fact, sin.⁵

Himes is aware that compatibilists could read the premises and conclusion of this argument in a way that is consistent with their view. If a Christian had reached an adequate level of sanctification (i.e. has a moral character that is properly formed) and thus had the right desires and values, then the compatibilist can readily agree that it is possible for him not to have sinned in circumstances where he did, in fact, sin (because he did not, in that case, have adequate sanctification). So, Himes makes it clear that by “possible” here he means a “legitimate possibility”—which means the possibility of acting contrary to one’s desires and values at the time of the temptation. Himes argues that an agent’s desires and values cannot be the deciding factor in whether or not an agent succumbs to a particular temptation. “Otherwise,” he writes, “Paul would have qualified the statement as follows: ‘God . . . will not let you be tempted beyond your ability *so long as your value scale is set correctly.*’”⁶ He concludes,

Thus, if this paper’s interpretation of 1 Cor 10:13 is correct, one must assert that a believer, no matter what the situation, has the ability to choose not to sin (since God does not allow the temptation to get to the point where the end result is, by necessity, sin). Since Christians sin, if they have the power/ability not to sin at any given situation (regardless of their current value scale), then they

⁴ Himes, “When a Christian Sins” 339 (emphasis original).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. 340 (emphasis original).

must possess the power of contrary choice. In other words, Christians, in the face of temptation, possess libertarian freedom.⁷

So, it is Himes's view, based on his exegesis of 1 Cor 10:13, that the Christian must possess the libertarian power of contrary choice at the precise point of temptation. Otherwise Paul's promise to believers struggling with sin—the promise that that they can avoid sin—is null and void.

II. A RESPONSE TO HIMES'S ARGUMENT

No Christian wants to dismiss or minimize Paul's inspired promise in 1 Cor 10:13 that believers may avoid temptation to sin. Paul clearly indicates that God "will make a way of escape" from temptations. The question, though, is *how* God makes this way of escape. Himes argues that the means by which God enables the Christian to resist temptation is *by giving him the power of contrary choice at the very moment of temptation*. In other words, according to Himes, when a Christian is faced with a temptation to sin, there is a causal gap between his character (desires, values, etc.) and his actions that is closed only by his own libertarianly free choice. This choice is presumably made by the Christian being given (or having) the ability to either sin or not sin in that situation independently of his desires and values. Apparently, Himes thinks that this view is the only way to make sense out of God's making a way of escape from temptations to sin.

I would suggest, however, that there is another way to make sense of 1 Cor 10:13—even granting Himes's view that this verse is about the avoidance of sin—that is amenable to compatibilism. In fact, I think that this alternative view is suggested by the larger context of 1 Cor 10:13 and by other relevant texts. The idea behind this alternative view is that God makes a way of escape for the Christian *by encouraging and helping him in the progressive development of a virtuous character*. The Christian is able to resist temptation *not* because he has the power of contrary choice, but because he has been empowered by God to develop the desires and values and moral habits requisite to consistently doing good. Conversely, it is inexcusable for the Christian to succumb to temptation *not* because he fails appropriately to exercise libertarian freedom at the moment of temptation, but because he fails to develop the desires and values and moral habits requisite to consistently doing good. In defense of this view, I offer the following three points:

1. *The larger context of 1 Cor 10:13 suggests the compatibilist-friendly interpretation.* Himes himself argues that both the larger and immediate context of 1 Cor 10:13 is crucial to understanding the verse. Indeed, he appeals to the context to make his case for his preferred understanding of the key term περιπατός. In this context, we find Paul's intriguing words about his own pursuit of sanctification in 1 Cor 9:24–27. Himes argues that this text functions as Paul's transition from the earlier part of chapter 9 to his instruction in chapter 10.⁸ So Himes himself sees an intimate logical connection between 9:24–27 and 10:13. Here is what Paul writes:

⁷ Ibid. 341.

⁸ Ibid. 333–34.

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises *self-control* in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but *I discipline my body and make it my slave*, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified. (NASB)

In this passage, Paul uses various athletic metaphors to encourage his readers and himself to pursue sanctification. Specifically, he emphasizes the development of self-control and the disciplining of one's body in order to make it one's slave. These virtues are necessary for not being "disqualified" as were the idolatrous Israelites in the wilderness (1 Cor 10:1–11). Paul then warns his reader, "Therefore, let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall" (v. 12). With this said, Paul then speaks of God's provision for the avoidance of temptation in verse 13. Notice then the connection between the development of self-control and discipline and God's "making a way of escape" from temptation.

The verb translated "exercises self-control" is ἐγκρατεύεται. Its cognate noun (ἐγκράτεια) is used in 2 Pet 1:6 of a virtue to be added *through diligence* to one's faith. It is not a virtue that one automatically acquires when one comes to saving faith, but one that is developed progressively through rigorous spiritual effort. Likewise, the present tense of ὑποπιάζω (variously translated as "discipline," "treat roughly," "buffet," etc.—literally "give a black eye"⁹) is likely a customary present indicating an habitual activity with the stated goal of making (and keeping) the body a slave rather than letting it be subject to the whims of one's passions.¹⁰

With this understanding, how are we to understand the means by which God provides us a way of escape in the face of temptations to sin? It is not, as Himes argues, by giving us the power of contrary choice at the point of the temptation. Rather, it is *by enabling us to progressively develop the necessary virtues—habits of character—that will, when acquired, motivate us internally to make the right choices*. Rather than enabling us to make choices "regardless of [our] current value scale," the very point that Paul seems to be making is that we can avoid sin by working to acquire virtues that will naturally and inevitably lead to right actions. Conversely, those who succumb to temptation are those who have failed to follow Paul's example of diligently pursuing the acquisition of such virtues.

If this exegesis is right, then this text does not provide a counterexample to compatibilism. Indeed, this view of 1 Cor 10:13 is obviously consistent with a compatibilist view of freedom which sees a person's actions as determined by his desires and values (i.e. his character).

2. *Other relevant texts confirm the compatibilist-friendly interpretation.* Another text that arguably deals with the Christian's struggle with sin is Rom 7:14–25. There is considerable debate, of course, over the relation of the words of this text to Paul's

⁹ See Simon J. Kistemaker, *I Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 314.

¹⁰ See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 521–22. I am indebted to Donald Hartley for this observation.

spiritual status.¹¹ For example, is he discussing his situation prior to his conversion, or does he have in mind his state as a disciple of Christ? I cannot resolve that debate decisively here. I will simply assume the more traditional view that Paul is discussing his (and others') struggle with sin as a genuine disciple of Christ.¹² My point will be that anyone who accepts *that* view of Rom 7:14–25 will see this text as providing strong confirmation of my exegesis of 1 Cor 10:13.

On my assumed view of Rom 7:14–25, Paul expresses his frustration over his inner struggle with remaining sin. He begins with the startling words, “I am ... sold into *bondage* to sin” (v. 14). He finds himself “not practicing what [he] would like to do [i.e. keep God’s good law] (vv. 14–15). Rather, he confesses that it is often the case that *he does not do what he wants to do* (obey God’s law) and that *he does what he does not want to do* (sin) (vv. 18–19). He summarizes his frustration in verse 23: “But I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a *prisoner* of the law of sin which is in my members.” This leads Paul to cry out in despair, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” (v. 24), and to throw himself on the grace of God in Christ and the hope of deliverance from sin that he brings (v. 25).

On Himes’s view of 1 Cor 10:13, we would have to say that the only reason why Paul “does what he doesn’t want to do” and “doesn’t do what he wants to do” is because he simply fails to exercise the libertarian freedom that God gives him every time he faces a temptation to sin. Not only does this view fail to do justice to Paul’s very stark language (“bondage,” “prisoner,” etc.), it would also render us unable to seriously sympathize with Paul’s struggle. After all, on Himes’s view, nothing in Paul’s background or character leading up to a particular temptation plays the decisive role in Paul’s choice to sin or not sin. The decisive factor is Paul’s libertarianly free will, the failure of which to exercise appropriately is completely (on Himes’s view) inexcusable. But it seems rather that Paul is expressing here a *real inability* on his part—the inability to (consistently) avoid sin. In himself, he is unable to win the war that rages in his members. Commenting on this text, F. F. Bruce puts it this way:

[T]he man who, even at the height of his apostolic career, made it his daily business to discipline himself so as not to be disqualified in the spiritual contest, the man who pressed on to the goal of God’s upward calling in Christ Jesus, knew that the “immortal garland” was to be run for “not without dust and heat.” He was too constantly given to portraying the way of holiness as a race to be run, a

¹¹ For the various views, see Terry L. Wilder, ed., *Perspectives on Our Struggle with Sin: Three Views of Romans 7* (Nashville: B&H, 2011).

¹² For defenses of this interpretation, see C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans 1–8* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975) 341–70; Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951) 227–47; Robert Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1996) 290–310; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (trans. John Owen; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 259–75; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 284–98; Robert H. Mounce, *Romans* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995) 167–68.

battle to be fought, for us to imagine that victory came to him “sudden, in a minute.”

... The present passage leads up to a paean of triumph, although it begins with a sad confession of inability.¹³

It is this inability that explains Paul’s cry of despair and it explains his appeal to Christ. It also explains why he goes on in Rom 8:1–13 to exhort believers, *inter alia*, to diligently labor to mortify sin. Mortification is a difficult, ongoing process as indicated by Paul’s present tense language (“putting to death the deeds of the body”; v. 13). And it is only possible because God “will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you” (v. 11). Notice the future tense, promissory nature of this life-giving by the Spirit.

Two other well-known texts also indicate that avoiding sin and doing good are not simply matters of exercising libertarian free will but involve a gradual process of sanctification. In Phil 2:12–13, in the context of discussing the Philippians’ obedience to God, Paul writes, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” Believers are exhorted to “work out their salvation.” This is connected in verse 13 to their “willing” and “doing” of God’s good pleasure. So, the idea here is that they are to strive (an ongoing process) to do God’s will. And the reason they can succeed in this endeavor is that God is “at work in [them]” *progressively* enabling them “to will” [θέλειν, to want, desire] and “to do” [ἐνεργεῖν, actively work or do] in accordance with God’s will.¹⁴ The clear implication here is that unless God gives the believer the right desires, values, and inclinations, he cannot do God’s good pleasure. But note also that doing God’s good pleasure proceeds from having the right desires. It is hardly likely, then, that the same Paul who wrote Phil 2:12–13 would then, in 1 Cor 10:13, expect the believer to avoid sin by acting independently of his desires and values as Himes would have it.

Finally, in 1 Tim 4:7, Paul instructs Timothy (and us) to “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness.” The key verb here is γυμναζε and is derived from the rigorous training of an athlete. Such training involved a process of gradual improvement, of course. Since Paul sets godliness as the goal of Timothy’s discipline, then, the idea is that godliness (and no doubt godly choices) are *the outcome of a gradual process of training*, not an immediate libertarian choice made in such a way as to render any prior training irrelevant and unnecessary.¹⁵

3. *Himes’s libertarian view implies an implausible view of sanctification.* The texts I have discussed above (excluding 1 Cor 10:13 for the time being) clearly indicate

¹³ F. F. Bruce, *The Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 144–45. Michael Horton echoes this sentiment when he writes, “The believer described in Romans 6 as delivered completely from the dominion of sin through baptism into Christ is the same person in Romans 7 who is consistently frustrated by his or her failures to follow the script?” (*The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011] 660 [emphasis original]).

¹⁴ See Wallace’s discussion of this text in *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* 602–3.

¹⁵ Wallace identifies this verb as a gnomic present—a present tense verb that states a general, timeless fact (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* 523–25, esp. n. 30).

that the believer's sanctification is a process that involves rigorous discipline in conjunction with the transforming and energizing power of the Holy Spirit. This process develops virtues in the believer like self-control and other fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23) that provide the motivation necessary to do God's will. I believe that Himes would no doubt agree that a believer's sanctification includes the development of these moral and Christian virtues. One cannot be sanctified unless one has a sanctified character. Nevertheless, Himes's view of 1 Cor 10:13 has the odd implication that regardless of a believer's state of character, regardless of his spiritual maturity, regardless of how long or short a time he has been a believer, *he could consistently choose to always do the right thing*. After all, by Himes's own admission, the believer's libertarian free will may be exercised in the face of a temptation to sin irrespective of his beliefs, desires, and values at the time. According to Himes, "(1) Agent (w) sinned in situation (x). (2) According to 1 Cor 10:13, (w) was able ... not to have sinned at situation (x), no matter what (x) represents (i.e. no matter what value scale, no matter what the temptation, etc.). Thus, at situation (x), (w) could have chosen either to sin or not to sin."¹⁶ So, on Himes's view, it is conceivable that a particular Christian always, without exception, chooses to do right—and this regardless of his level of sanctification or maturity. Even more oddly, a Christian person, regardless of his level of Christian character development, *could consistently choose to always do the wrong thing*. Himes says as much when he writes in the passage just quoted, "At situation (x), (w) could have chosen either to sin or not to sin." One wonders how this is consistent with the notion, held by all but antinomians, that a person who is truly regenerate will live at least a partially transformed life. All of this, of course, renders the disciplining of oneself for godliness and the working out of one's salvation ultimately irrelevant to the avoidance (or committing) of sin. This is highly implausible, to say the least.

Of course, Himes could respond by saying that the development of Christian character is relevant to the avoidance of sin in that Christian character would make resisting sin *easier*. Be that as it may, Himes would still have to admit, it seems to me, that even a person with little or no character development could consistently choose to do right. Likewise, a person with the most mature Christian character could conceivably consistently and always choose to sin. It seems clear to me that these possibilities cannot be squared with the close connection between character development and righteous action we have seen in the texts we have examined. If Himes thinks these possibilities are not implied by his view of 1 Cor 10:31, he needs to explain why they are not.

III. CONCLUSION

Paul Himes has contended that 1 Cor 10:13—on the assumption that *πειρασμός* means "temptation to sin"—implies that believers have libertarian freedom at least when they are confronted with the temptation to sin. He thinks that this is the only way to make sense out of the text's assurance that God makes a way

¹⁶ Himes, "When a Christian Sins" 340.

for believers to avoid succumbing to temptation. I have shown, however, that there are contextual reasons, especially in 1 Cor 9:24–27, for thinking that the means by which God makes a way for believers to escape temptation is through the progressive development of Christian virtues such as self-control. This understanding of 1 Cor 10:13 finds confirmation and support from other important texts such as Phil 2:12–13, 1 Tim 4:7, and (possibly) Rom 7:14–25, which teach that sanctification and the avoidance of sin is the result of discipline cooperating with the grace of God. Moreover, I have shown that Himes's libertarian understanding of 1 Cor 10:13 has some implausible implications regarding the nature of sanctification. Specifically, it has the consequence that character development is ultimately irrelevant to the avoidance or commission of sin.

If my view of 1 Cor 10:13 is correct, then quite the opposite conclusion than the one Himes defends would seem to follow. At the very least, 1 Cor 10:13 is consistent with compatibilism. But the close connection between character development and the avoidance of sin that Paul seems to advocate (both in this text and the others discussed) actually supports (if not entails) a compatibilist view of freedom when it comes to the believer's confrontation with temptation.